



# Islam: The Religion and the People

*Bernard Lewis*

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**Praise for Bernard Lewis** "For newcomers to the subject[el] Bernard Lewis is the man." *TIME Magazine* "The doyen of Middle Eastern studies." *The New York Times* "No one writes about Muslim history with greater authority, or intelligence, or literary charm." **British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper** "Bernard Lewis has no living rival in his field." *Al Ahrām, Cairo* (the most influential Arab world newspaper) "When it comes to Islamic studies, Bernard Lewis is the father of us all. With brilliance, integrity, and extraordinary mastery of languages and sources, he has led the way for[el]investigators seeking to understand the Muslim world." *National Review* "Bernard Lewis combines profound depth of scholarship with encyclopedic knowledge of the Middle East and, above all, readability." *Daily Telegraph (London)* "Lewis speaks with authority in prose marked by lucidity, elegance, wit and force." *Newsday (New York)* "Lewis' style is lucid, his approach, objective." *Philadelphia Inquirer* "Lewis writes with unsurpassed erudition and grace." *Washington Times* **An objective, easy-to-read introduction to Islam by Bernard Lewis, one of the West's leading experts on Islam** For many people, Islam remains a mystery. Here Bernard Lewis and Buntzie Ellis Churchill examine Islam: what its adherents believe and how their religion has shaped them, their rich and diverse cultures, and their politics over more than 14 centuries. Considered one of the West's leading experts on Islam, Lewis, with Churchill, has written an illuminating introduction for those who want to understand the faith and the global challenges it confronts and presents. Whatever your political, personal, or religious views, this book will help you understand Islam's reality. Lewis and Churchill answer questions such as... - How does Islam differ from Judaism and Christianity? - What are the pillars of the Islamic faith? - What does Islam really say about peace and jihad? - How does the faith regard non-Muslims? - What are the differences between Sunni and Shi'a? - What does Islam teach about the position of women in society? - What does Islam say about free enterprise and profit? - What caused the rise of radical Islam? - What are the problems facing Muslims in the U.S. and Europe and what are the challenges posed by those minorities?

## Islam: The Religion and the People Details

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## **From Reader Review Islam: The Religion and the People for online ebook**

### **Lynn says**

I treated this book more as the cliff notes to accompany the novels and non fiction accounts I've been focuses on in my reading list. It is a short read where a highlighter is more useful than a bookmark.

I completed this book a few weeks ago and I must agree with many of the other reviews here it is not a in depth book nor does it have an over all tone one would expect from a book on this subject however that said I thought it could be helpful in driving home the basic in an easy to understand way and giving the reader a tremendous account in an easily digestible way.

The chapters are clearly defined. The charts, photos, and amusing grey boxes of funny asides where all really text book like but useful in putting a time line together for me or re-enforcing the names, dates, and rules that govern the region.

i would recommend in conjunction with more in depth reading.

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### **Tessa says**

Ashamed at how little I understood Islam, this was a solid intro for me. Simple, straight forward, and it managed to cover many topics. I find it highly problematic that the authors conclude the book by establishing the importance of understanding our enemy and rescuing "his" unhappy people. It didn't seem in accordance with the somewhat neutral tone if the book, and only further established Western dominance and superiority.

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### **Mark says**

Seems fine for the most part, although the conclusion veers into "Islam the enemy" territory after a mostly evenhanded and well-condensed overview of Muslim history and beliefs. Ignore the "Conclusion" section and it's mostly a pretty good introduction to the subject.

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### **Thomas Paul says**

Islam is one of the world's most important religions. With more than a billion adherents in 56 sovereign nations and growing minorities in many other countries, it is important that those of us who are not followers of Islam at least understand it. This books offers a basic look at Islam and the Muslim people throughout the world. Unfortunately, it leaves many unanswered questions and answers many questions that seem trivial at best.

A simple example should explain my point. The authors remind us that only Muslims are permitted to enter the sacred city of Mecca but they fail to answer the most basic question... how does once become a Muslim?

Does Islam have a form of baptism? Does one get a certificate when one joins? Is there a quiz? How are non-Muslims prevented from entering Mecca? These most basic questions apparently never occurred to the authors. But they do devote a chapter to the clothes Muslims wear. In fact, this is a basic problem with the book. The choice of topics seems to be almost random rather than selected for importance and their lack of order makes the book feel more like a series of articles than a book.

There also seems to be an attempt to be an apologist for Islam as well. The violent overthrow of a government in the Arab world is claimed to be the moral equivalent of using money to buy influence in the West. The authors try to claim that polygamy is justified because it prevents adultery and prostitution. They make the claim that women were historically better treated in the Muslim world than the Christian world without offering any evidence to justify the claim. They make the absurd claim that a 10th century passage about the evolution of language prefigures the Darwinian theory of evolution which shows a complete lack of understanding of Darwin's theory. They try to make the claim that suicide bombings are not acceptable in Islam by claiming historical backing but since Islam does not condemn them today, the claim has no basis other than wishful thinking.

I had hoped the book would be like an "Islam for Dummies" but it falls far short. The history is fragmented and there is more information in the definitions list at the back of the book than in the text. Overall, the book is a fair introduction to this most important topic but it falls far short of being a complete introduction.

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### **Gaylene says**

I find this book easy to read and very informative. It has a precise way of outlining the faith and a nuanced way of describing the people and culture. The book offers some answers to several questions including: What does Islam say about peace and jihad? A quote from page 148 of the book says: "In the traditional view, the world is divided into two parts: the House of Islam where Muslims rule and Muslim law is enforced, and the House of War, the rest of the world where infidels still rule. According to traditional teaching, the obligation of jihad will continue until all the world either adopts Islam or submits to Muslim rule. This perpetual war may be interrupted by truces, which may even be of long duration, but it does not end until final victory." I find this quote chilling. I don't like war and I don't like to think of a perpetual religious war being waged whether I am aware and consciously involved in it or not. As I continued with the book there were some appendices that tended to definitions of words which I found tedious. I have concluded that Islam is extremely complex and I would be cautious to think I know much more about the religion and the people than I did before completing this book.

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### **Chip Hunter says**

If you are interested in learning about Muslim customs, dialect, and dress, this book is for you. If you're looking for an in-depth analysis of the history and current state of Islam as a religion, keep looking. Some people may find it interesting to learn the names of the various Muslim garments (none of which I can now remember), but I suspect most people that look into this book will be searching for something with a little more investigation into the background and meaning of Islam and the current thinking of Muslim people. And there is very little of that to be found here.

Even the chapters dedicated to what I thought would be the more informative aspects of the book are rather shallow. Analyses of the status of Muslim women and of the reasons for the Islamic world's regression in technology and economics are less than inspiring. In fact, nearly everything in this book, except for various

Arabic words and their definitions, seems commonplace and well-known. Really nothing ground-breaking or understanding-inducing to be found.

This book also fails to provide any sort of depth in its analysis of Islamic history, the Koran, or the prophet Mohammad. Surprising given the title of the book, but fitting considering the rest of the content. The book does include a few Koranic quotes that help explain Muslim tendencies toward war and conquest and provides the very ambiguous conclusion that Islam is really neither a "religion of peace", nor a backward and dangerous religion of the sword.

Ridiculously un-funny excerpts meant to demonstrate "Islamic Humor" appear throughout the book. Most are impossible to see how they could possibly be considered funny in any way at all, while a very few show some small glimmer of cleverness, but still fail at approaching anything near a joke. The following quotes one of the more disturbing examples of Islamic Humor found in this book (p.217):

A certain man became a Shi'ite and went around saying that whoever was not a Shi'ite was a bastard. His son said to him: "But I am not a Shi'ite."

To this the man replied: "Yes indeed. I bedded your mother before I bought her."

The book ends with a extremely disappointing chapter entitled "Radical Islam" that takes up all of about 5 pages and is mostly a discourse on the correct descriptor to use when talking about Islamic extremists, and with a statement by the authors to the effect of -Most Muslims are not radical, and most radicals aren't terrorists. Almost no analyses of why radical Islam has become so prominent, nor what radical sympathizers want or expect. You do get a nice photo of Osama, but absolutely nothing about his past or present influences or inspirations. Or about the reluctance of Muslim leaders to condemn terrorist acts.

So, if you want to learn about Arabic writing styles, architecture, and clothing, you may want to check this one out from your public library. But if you are looking for something to really help you understand the philosophies, thoughts, and motivations of the Islamic people that have so suddenly come into all of our daily thoughts, look elsewhere.

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### **Ani says**

Good, basic overview of Islam, its beliefs/tenets, and the implication for policies of an Islamic government. Doesn't have all the details I would look for, and has a bit of an apologist undertone to it, but the info is still good, especially if you are starting with not knowing very much. I was a bit beyond that point- I know a lot more than your average American non-Muslim (but am not an expert by any means), and I still learned a few things, especially about how Islamic beliefs impact the philosophy of how a government should operate and how a state should be run.

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### **Nathan Albright says**

This book is a somewhat striking and unusual one in that it attempts to present an authoritative and somewhat favorable view of Islam and its adherents to a Western audience that may not be very sympathetic to Islam. To the authors' credit, they acknowledge the reasons for the gulf between the West and the Muslim world and manage to present the difficulties as well as the potentials for harmony between the two worlds well without disguising the real divides and barriers between them. Of particularly interest to me as a reader is that the ways that the authors view Jews and Muslims as being closer to each other than either is to

Christians happen to be in ways that I am close to Judaism and Islam in my own beliefs, like a high view of God's laws as well as various dietary restrictions and so on. I found it striking, therefore, that compared to most people within Christendom that I would be closer to Islam than ordinary Christianity, although it has not always been ways that have made me feel sympathetic to most Muslim regimes, except those relatively moderate ones that I have encountered, especially in Jordan.

This short volume of about 200 pages is divided into various chapters. After a preface and introduction the author begins with a discussion of the faith of Islam (1) as well as a discussion of the five pillars (2). After this there is a discussion about scripture, tradition, and law (3), the mosque (4), Muslim views towards diversity and tolerance (6), and the relationship between the Sunni, Shia, and other divisions within Islam (7). There is a discussion of some history (8), government and opposition (9), and Islam and its effects on the economy (10). After this the authors close the main part of the book with a discussion of women in Islam (11), dress (12), language and writing (13), war and peace (14), and the problem of radical Islam (15). Interestingly enough, though, there are more supplementary materials to this book than one would expect, with a conclusion, a discussion of some practical matters relating to Islam, and then a lengthy discussion of terms and topics that provide more information to the interested reader before a topical index. Although by no means a large book, this book certainly will give enough information for anyone to be at least somewhat knowledgeable about Islam and its importance for the West.

Admittedly, a reader who has read a lot about Islam and the Middle East will probably know a great deal about this book, and may have even seen real life examples of some of the aspects of Muslim life discussed here. That said, even those who are very familiar with such matters will likely learn something, such as the reason for the Muslim avoidance of hats because of their tie to views of religious betrayal for Muslims. Even so, despite the fact that much of this book was familiar, it was certainly a worthwhile read nonetheless. This book manages the difficult task of giving good information about a contentious subject in a way that both informs and also warns the intended target audience about matters of importance, and also points out the tricky issue of terms and language that are used by people or disliked by people because of the connotations. Whether or not this book will be everyone's cup of tea, there is still a lot to appreciate about it and few mainstream Muslims would likely find trouble with the way it discusses the thinking and behavior and beliefs of Muslims to a Western audience with at least some interest in learning more about Islam.

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## **Diane Kistner says**

In these tumultuous, complex, sometimes frightening times, I find great comfort in understanding why and how things happen. I am so glad I got "Islam: The Religion and The People."

By way of analogy, learning about Islam through this book is like my experience with learning Spanish: I was surprised to find, in a language that at first seemed so foreign, many commonalities between English and Spanish. Both of these languages evolved from the same roots, and once the similarities are perceived, the differences are better understood and a sensitivity to nuance and cultural elements embedded in the language (its flavor) begins to develop.

So has been my experience with this book, which in the Introduction notes our common roots:

"Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, sometimes referred to as 'the Abrahamic religions,' are closely related. All arose in the same area, where each drew on its predecessors; all three share many important doctrines and attitudes that mark them off from the other religions of the world." (p. 2)

From this point, through comparison and contrast with what we know from our own religious foundations,

the depth and complexity of the Islamic world and how it fits into the whole world unfolds. There is so much I am learning about Islam that I did not know; in exploring it more deeply, I am also more deeply exploring Christianity and Judaism.

Beyond understanding ourselves in relation to followers of Islam, this book helps us understand the pros and cons of secular and sectarian forms of government and affords a glimpse into why establishing a "democratic" government in Iraq has been so impeded and fraught with peril. Which form of government is better when populations are mixed, as is the case in most of the world: secular (religion and the laws by which we are governed are kept separate) or sectarian (the rule of law is grounded in religion)? These are questions Americans should deeply consider before they walk into a voting booth.

Non-Muslims may think of Islam as being a one-size-fits-all faith, just as there is a tendency on the part of non-believers and the more fundamentalist believers alike to perceive Christianity and Judaism in the same narrow way. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I thought I was ahead of most Americans in knowing that followers of Islam can be Shia or Sunni and that these two are "enemies" of each other, but this book shows that it's far more complex than that. Just as, within Christianity, there are Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Catholics, Pentecostals, and others--plus numerous gradations within each--so there are within Islam. And just as there are different interpretations of the U.S. Constitution, some of which ignore the changes and modernizations we have experienced over the last several hundred years, so there are different interpretations of Sharia, Islamic law. I am finding this knowledge most helpful in trying to sort out the simplifications we are fed through the dumbed-down, often propagandized American news media.

Finally, this book may have a profound effect on people's sense of their own faith. I write from the perspective of one raised Southern Baptist who converted to Judaism in my mid-twenties, then abandoned both religions for a more private and eclectic spirituality because of the bigotry and intolerance I encountered among the "true believers"--those who tend to congregate and hold themselves separate from, and above, everyone else. Like many people who just don't know any better because they have not been exposed to the complexities of the greater world, I judged the religions themselves by the limited beliefs of the relative few adherents I encountered--and rejected them. But the labels "agnostic" and "atheist" never fit me.

Reading this book has actually strengthened my own beliefs and grounding in spirituality, and I have a renewed appreciation for the place of religion in our world. The scales have been lifted from my eyes; I can see past the tiny, narrow, and uber-radical Christian, Muslim, and Jewish interpretations that have obscured the beauty, depth, and wisdom of these three great world religions. We have many values in common, and it is these values--not any one religious interpretation--that we must look to as we work to secure, save, and grow our world. We must also respect our differences and seek to understand why those who are different from us might react to us the way they do.

We must find common ground, starting within our own country. This book helps us do just that.

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## **Rebekah says**

What did we learn? According to the Koran and the prophet Muhammad, Sharia Law is only for Muslims, Clothing traditional to Muslims is only for Muslims, monotheistic religions are to be tolerated, but can be taxed, Muslim men may marry women of other Monotheistic religions and allow them to practice their religion. Throughout history, it has been the Christians who gave others the choice of converting or dying and sometimes even converting wasn't good enough. Islam doesn't have any Turn the other cheek or Love

Thy Nieghbor that Christians have in the Gospels yet Christians have been more aggressive in violence for the religion in the past. There are as many different sects and denominations as the Christians.

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### **Dauida says**

A lot of good and interesting information, presented in a readable format. Sometimes hard to discern Lewis's point of view. Seemed like he was trying to be objective and just present the facts, but didn't always succeed, especially when you get to the last chapter on radical Islam. Overall, I learned a lot, especially about linguistics and history. More people should read this book!

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### **Stephanie Darrow says**

Read this for a class, gave very basic information about Islam, from a knowledgeable source.

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### **Mike W says**

Bernard Lewis's slim tome is a useful introduction to Islamic culture and thought. While a little dry, the book plays it straight, as evident in this passage:

"For some time now, two contrasting images have dominated debate in the Western world about Islamic attitudes toward war and warfare... One of them depicts the Muslims as a race of ferocious and fanatical warriors... with a sword in one hand and a Koran in the other... The other depicts Islam as a religion of peace... Both contain elements of truth; both are wildly exaggerated."

Lewis sees neither to praise Islam nor to blame it. Instead he strives to present the unvarnished truth about one of the world's great religions. Among his most interesting themes is that today's radical Islam has little connection to Islamic tradition.

So for those who want a brief introduction to Islam, this book will be a good choice.

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### **Dale says**

#### **Outstanding**

*Islam: The Religion and the People* is, without a doubt, the single best academic introduction to Islam that I have seen. It covers just about every facet of the religion for the non-expert, from what happens in a mosque on Fridays to the split between the Shiites and the Sunnis to how the Muslim world deals with not being able to charge interest to rules concerning food and the question of jihad.

This volume is short, well-written and thorough. It includes a glossary of terms mentioned in the book with more explanation (so the text does not bog down). Sidebars are included throughout the text with humorous notes that further illustrate the issues that are being discussed.

I have not encountered a better book to introduce Islam to the curious Westerner. I highly recommend this one to anyone heading off to a Muslim country, who works with Muslims or who is just curious about this popular and influential faith.

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### **Bojan Tunguz says**

Ever since the events of September 11th 2001 there has been an increase in the interest for Islam in the West, and particularly in the US. This increased interest has resulted in a formidable increase in the number of studies, publications and college courses, all of which try to explain and inform the public about what Islam is, what its basic teachings are, and what is the history of the Islamic world. One was faced with a veritable embarrassment of riches, and there was no easy way to decide which author was truly an expert in the field, and which ones were trying to capitalize on a new publishing fad. With that in mind, one person that clearly stands out head and shoulders above all the other polemicists and scholars is Bernard Lewis, a doyen in the field of Oriental and Middle Eastern studies. He has been actively involved in this field since at least World War II, and his knowledge of the Islamic history is second to none. His books have explored several different themes, but now in one volume comes a digest of all the basic facts about Islam. This is a very accessible and informative first introduction to Islam, and it covers all the basics really well. It avoids both of the traps that many other books fall into: either painting Islam with overly rosy spectacles, or vilifying it to the point that it becomes a distortion of what it really is. The end of the book provides reader with a list of terms and topics, which in itself is a useful guide to the main words and ideas that frequently occur in all discussions about Islam. Many of those terms have by now become familiar to the public at large, but even those benefit from having some new light shed on them. Overall, if you either don't know much about Islam, or would like to systematize and refresh what you already know, this is a great book to read.

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